

Witch 4

Chapter 4 Flame

"In the end, what happened when the mine collapsed, can you repeat it for me step by step?" Roland asked.

Anna nodded and began to describe it.

Roland was a bit surprised, he expected her to stay silent or to angrily curse at him, but instead she just responded with, "ask whatever you want," and obediently told her tale.

It wasn't a complicated story, but a sad one nonetheless. Anna's father was a miner and when the mine collapsed, he was at work. Immediately after they got the news of the collapse, Anna and the other miners' families went over to help rescue their loved ones. The North Mine was previously rumored to be an underground monster lair with many forks in the road, extending in all directions. Since the rescuers were under no unified command, the volunteers separated after arriving at the mine entry so that when Anna found her father, only her neighbours, Susan and Ansgar were by her side.

Anna had discovered that her father's leg was crushed under a full ore cart and he couldn't move, but at his side was another miner patting him down, searching for her father's money. As the looter saw them arrive, he took a pick and rushed at Ansgar and knocked him to the ground, but just at the moment when he was about to strike her, Anna killed him first.

Anna's neighbours vowed that they would never say anything about this matter, and with their help Anna rescued her father. But before dawn, the next day, Anna's father went out on his crutches and reported to the patrolling guards that his daughter was a witch.

"Why?" Roland, when he had heard up until this point, could not help but ask.

Barov sighed and answered, "Probably so he could receive the gold reward. The discovery and reporting of a witch, can get you 25 gold royals. For a man with a crippled leg, these 25 gold royals are equivalent to what he could earn for half a lifetime of work."

After a moment of silence, Roland asked, "Your opponent was a strong and grown-up man, how were you able to kill him?"

At this Anna laughed, and the flames of the torches shook, just like high waves on a previously calm lake's surface.

"It was exactly like what you think, I used the power of the devil." Anna said.

"Shut up! Vile sorceress!" Shouted the warden, but everyone could hear his voice trembling.

"Is that true? I want to see it." the fourth prince was unmoved by their antics as he calmly said.

"Your Highness, this is no laughing matter!" The Knight Commander interjected as he furrowed his brows.

Roland stepped out from behind the protection of his knight, step by step moving closer towards the cell as he said, "Everyone who is too afraid of her can leave, I did not ask you to stay here."

“Don’t panic, she has a ‘God’s Locket of Retribution’ around her neck!” shouted Barov loudly to comfort everyone, but likely also to reassure himself, “no matter how powerful the devil is, he cannot break God’s blessing.”

Standing in front of the prison bars, Roland and Anna were at arm’s length and he could clearly see her dusty and bruised cheek. Her soft facial features showed that she still was a minor, but her expression did not have any traces of childishness. More than that, even anger was hard to find. It was the kind of disharmonious thing Roland had only had seen on TV.

It was the face of a wandering orphan who had suffered from poverty, hunger, cold, etc... but it was not exactly the same, normally in front of the camera the lost children always stood with a bent and beaten down body, their head down, but Anna did not.

From the beginning until now, she had still tried to stand straight with her gaze slightly raised, calmly looking into the prince’s eyes. She did not fear death, Roland realized. Instead, she was waiting for death.

“Is this the first time you have seen a witch, my lord? Your curiosity might get you killed.” Anna said.

“If it was really the power of the devil, you would absolutely not be in this current situation,” Roland responded, “If that were true, it is not I should be fear death, but your father.”

The fires in the prison suddenly became dark, and this was definitely not an illusion, what seemed to be like suppressed flames were soon left with only tight flame clusters. Behind himself, Roland could hear the sound of rapid breathing and prayer, as well as the muffled sound of panicked people accidentally falling down.

Roland’s heartbeat accelerated and he felt himself at an unusual turning point. On one side was the world with common sense, which was in accordance with the laws and constants that he knew, not one thread loose, And on the other side was an incredible new world, which was full of mystery and the unknown. And right now he was standing in front of this world.

Hung on her neck is actually the ‘God’s Locket of Retribution’? What a simple and crude locket, Roland thought. A red iron chain with a sparkling and translucent pendant, if the witch did not have both her hands handcuffed behind her back, couldn’t she use a quick pull to destroy this kind of thing?

Roland glanced at the crowd behind him, who were still mouthing prayers in panic. He quickly reached into the cell, grabbed the pendant, and with a little tug the necklace’s chain snapped and then crashed down broken, the move startled even Anna.

“Come on.” Roland whispered.

Are you in the end a liar, some type of alchemist, or are you a real witch? If you now take out bottles and jars and start compounding acids, I will be disappointed, Roland thought.

Roland then heard a crackling sound, which was the noise of the thermal expansion of water vapor. Thanks to a dramatic rise in temperature, the water on the ground beneath them had changed to steam.

Roland saw a blazing flame rising directly from Anna’s foot, and then the ground where she stood was burning up. The torches behind them exploded simultaneously, as if they received pure oxygen, in a

burst of brilliant light. For a short time, the whole cell was as if it was in daylight, and all this was accompanied by the onlookers' terrified screams.

When the witch moved forward, the flames surrounding her moved with her. As she came to the edge of her cell, the dozens of iron bars that made up the wall became pillars of fire.

Roland was forced to retreat, the heated air was biting his skin, making him feel pain. In just a few breaths of time, he had escaped from a late autumn summer, no, this was a different kind of heat, this was solely generated by this high-temperature flame and not a full ambient summer heat. One side of his body was facing the flame's heat, and on the opposite side Roland felt a chill. He could even feel cold sweat trickling down his back.

...She really does not fear fire. Roland thought.

Roland remembered the words of the Assistant Minister. Only now could he really understand the meaning of that sentence.

She is the flame herself, and how could someone fear oneself?

Soon, the iron bars turned from crimson to a light yellow, and they began to melt. This meant that they have been heated to more than fifteen hundred degrees celsius, and achieving this in a condition without any insulating measures, which was far beyond the imagination of Roland. Like others, he had stepped away from the cell, firmly attaching himself to the wall farthest away from the cell.

If he had not done this, the heat the molten iron produced was enough to kill him even without direct contact, but it was also enough to clothes to combust, such as Anna's, her prisoner's smock had burnt to ashes and her body was now surrounded by a raging fire.

Roland didn't know how long it lasted, but in the end, the flame completely faded.

The torches were quietly burning on the section of the wall next to them, it seemed like nothing had ever happened. But Anna's burned clothes, the hot air, and the prison bars which looked like as if it was burned by the devil's minions, all this, told everyone that this wasn't an illusion.

In addition to Roland, only the Knight Commander was still standing. The others had collapsed to the ground, the warden was so scared that his pants smelled of urine. Anna was now standing naked outside the cell, her arm shackles were gone. She did not block the view at her naked body, her hands were hanging naturally at her side and her eyes which were blue like the sea were restored to the tranquility from before.

"Now I have satisfied your curiosity, Sir," she said, "Will you kill me now?"

"No," Roland stepped forward and wrapped his coat around her and said with a tone as mild as possible, "Miss Anna, I want to hire you."